VMC Vertigo

By Lt. Edgar Rodriguez

As is often the case for nuggets, I got a crash course in shipboard and Gulf ops during week-one ops and a hectic COMPTUEX and JTFEX. I was on my first WestPac as an H2P in the LAMPS Mk-III Seahawk. I had been in the squadron for a year and finally got to practice what I had learned in flight school and the FRS. When we left for deployment, I felt comfortable and proficient operating a helicopter on and around the ship.

We were a month into cruise, and most of our flights had been uneventful. The lack of excitement, along with good weather, lulled me into a false sense of security.

The morning started with an early CIC brief, followed by a weather brief. Like most days, the skies were clear, and the sea state was low. It appeared to be another standard day of deployed operations.

After finishing the preflight, I reviewed the shipboard and emergency procedures before jumping into the cockpit. We launched and immediately were tasked to search the area and VID ships.

I was fatigued from the heat and anxious to land at the end of our three-and-a-half-hour bag. I had been up late the night before and did not feel well. Right before recovery, our controller gave us further tasking. We needed to hot pump and relaunch as soon as possible. I didn't look forward to another three and a half hours strapped to my seat, in full flight gear, under the sun.

It was when my eyes went from the rolling deck to the steady horizon that I felt vertigo come on strong.

On the approach, I noticed the sea state had picked up, and the ship was taking on five-to-six-degree rolls. As I hovered over the flight deck, I felt a bit of the leans and started chasing the ship, instead of focusing on the horizon. After a tour of the deck, I managed to set down the helo in the RSD and relaxed for a few minutes while we fueled.

I felt poorly and considered telling the HAC I was not up to flying another bag but decided to continue the flight. I did not want him to think I wasn't pulling my fair share. We finished fueling and were ready to launch. Our numbers were updated and our PC made his final walk-around. While we were on deck, the ship had altered its course, and the new winds meant I had the takeoff. We called for amber deck, and off came the chocks and chains. I pulled up into a hover as the ship began taking on heavy rolls. My eyes focused on the superstructure. Although I again felt a bit of the leans, I still thought I was OK to continue. It was when my eyes went from the rolling deck to the steady horizon that I felt vertigo come on strong.

I made my power pull into the wind for takeoff and found myself excessively nose low, with an increasing angle of bank. We were less than 100 feet above the water—I still said nothing. My HAC saw what was happening, and he immediately challenged me. When I did not respond, he took the controls and flew us out of a bad situation.

I could have done several things to prevent the situation from going as far as it did. I should have used the HAC instead of cutting him out of the loop. I didn't take advantage of crew coordination. At the first sign of vertigo, I should have passed the controls to him. You rarely have enough time or altitude to allow a lengthy discourse on flying oneself out of the leans.

I didn't trust my instruments. I looked down at my attitude gyro and saw wings level, but I could have sworn the helo was in a right angle-of-bank turn. I even tried to compensate.

I thought about ORM. I had not slept well the night before and didn't feel well after the first hop. I should have told the HAC of my condition. He could have decided to continue the flight or to take the controls and get us off the deck.

Don't count on good weather and routine tasking. I lulled myself into a false sense of security after flying the same mission for the past five days under VMC conditions. Vertigo doesn't happen only in the clouds under turbulent conditions. It also can happen on a clear, sunny day. Had my HAC not been there to back me up, I would have gone for a swim that day.

Lt. Rodriguez flies with HSL-47 Det 5, on board USS *Princeton*.